

Action for Affordable Housing: Moving Housing Rights forward in our city, our province, our country

February 25, 2011 - Toronto

Organized by the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario

With Doug King from PIVOT Legal Society in Vancouver, B.C., Sheryl Lindsay from Sistering, Regi David from the Rooming House Tenants Group in Scarborough, Cathy Crowe, Toronto Disaster Relief Committee.

Cathy Crowe, Toronto Disaster Relief Committee remarks:

We were asked to answer or speak to three questions today:

The first question: What are the challenges that we face as we try to end homelessness and address the severe lack of good quality housing that people can afford?

1. Here, I have to begin by addressing the trauma, the impoverishment, the purposeful and sustained withdrawal of supports that people who are homeless or living in poverty experience.

Consider these examples:

- a new mayor Rob Ford, who plans to cut family shelter beds;
- new research that shows us that 1 in 5 homeless people are dead within a year once diagnosed with active tuberculosis;
- a coroner's office that will not track, let alone respond to the epidemic of homeless deaths including death by murder, trauma and tuberculosis;
- a city and a people that continue to allow the Out of the Cold program as an excuse for proper shelter for over 20 years. A program where people eat, sleep and toilet, if they're lucky, in conditions that DO NOT MEET the UN Standard for Refugee Camps;
- the City's banning of outreach that includes survival supplies by city-funded agencies.

This is all a way of saying that people affected are in worse shape than ever yet in greater need of organizing work on housing and homelessness.

2. Another challenge is our lack of memory, celebration, teachings of what we have won in the past. We shouldn't forget the origins of our once celebrated national housing program.

Returning World War II veterans, facing a housing shortage, fought for their right to housing. In Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver, women's groups joined in. They protested, they held picket signs, they demonstrated, and they actually took over empty buildings like the Hotel Vancouver and the Kildare barracks in Ottawa and squatted in them. Franklyn Hanratty, the leader of the Ottawa protest said that "*scores of Ottawa families are living under intolerable conditions*".

The campaign led to empty military buildings being freed up for housing; it led to a federal agency 'Wartime Housing Ltd.' that built 19,000 temporary rental homes over 4 years. It led to the creation of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, now the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which came to be our national housing program. The resulting war-time housing, co-op housing, supportive housing, city 'public' housing are evident all across Canada.

CMHC helped to build affordable housing for close to 2 million Canadians until that program was quietly killed.

But we should not be quiet about that or other victories. We should teach them, celebrate them and more importantly plan to repeat them.

Consider these victories:

- it was protests, i.e. marches, rallies, and action based strategies that opened up the armouries several times in Toronto for emergency shelter, that opened up the old Princess Margaret Hospital, the old Doctors' Hospital and old Nightingale campus nursing residence for shelter;
- it was action research, utilizing secret video camera from 'Spy Shop' that exposed unsafe, inhumane conditions in several Toronto shelters leading to remedies;
- it was a shelter inspection team that documented inhumane, unsafe conditions in Toronto shelters such as 3-4 people sleeping in the space one person should be in, that led to the Shelter Inspection Report and ultimately new Shelter Standards;
- it was a coalition of groups that fought for public inquiry and also inquests into the freezing deaths of 3 homeless men and also the tuberculosis death of Joseph Teigesser. These exposed conditions leading to among other things: a managed alcohol program at Seaton

House and expanded funding for TB screening and treatment among the homeless population.

-and last, but not really last of all, it was direct action, civil disobedience and humanitarian relief effort coordinated by TDRC but supported by many of you that lead to the successful pilot housing program with rent supplements that housed the Toronto Tent City residents after their brutal eviction

I mention this history because it seems long forgotten. We see a retrenchment in support for advocacy groups and efforts. We see those among us who dismiss these efforts. We see those among us who favour what they consider as the 'winnable' efforts by joining safe campaigns that have the efficacy of placebos. Easy to swallow but do nothing.

3. Perhaps the most serious challenge is the shift in ideology and discourse. Today housing policy is shaped by dialogue that includes emphasis on the American 'housing first' model, 'ten year plans' and 'streets to homes' programs. All the concepts in Naomi Klein's book 'Shock Doctrine' can be currently applied to the state of housing discourse and public policy in Canada: privatization, government deregulation and deep cuts to social programs.

So across the country the outcomes of that discourse are: the closure of shelters, new by-laws criminalizing homelessness or poverty (such as anti-panhandling laws), a shift to 'streets to homes' or 'in from the cold' type programs, emphasis on the private or charitable sector for solutions and funding for everything from shelter operation to social housing, and government de-funding of survival supplies and outreach – in other words 'starve them out policies'.

The second question: Are there upcoming opportunities to move a 'right to housing' agenda forward?

Support events that challenge the norm. For example 'The Hunger Inquiry Report' – due out next week. TDRC launched the Recession Relief Coalition several years ago and its recent Hunger Inquiry challenges our status quo thinking on hunger.

Support this Charter Challenge effort.

Utilize recent documentary films such as the Home Safe film series about family homelessness in Canada.

Support Libby Davies bill due to go to third reading.

The final question: What can we all do to end the housing crisis?

The 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 Formula

You have your time, your money, your support, your passion, your energy.

Give 1/3 of it to front line services, 1/3 to help house and 1/3 for advocacy.

For example:

1/3 Front line services. Help support frontline organizations in your community that help homeless people directly with food, shelter, clothing and support by donating money or volunteering.

1/3 Help house. Support community organizations that are building housing in your community. 1/3 Advocacy for new programs and solutions. Support anti-poverty and homeless and housing advocacy organizations.

Here are two final thoughts:

“A lot of people feel ‘What can I do, it’s hopeless.’ Well, through all these years there have been the people I’m talking about, whom we call activists who give us hope.” Studs Terkel

Naomi Klein says it all – we need:

“Movement Muscle”

Check with delivery